Ethics for Modern Christians
Part II - A Very Old New Morality
Isaiah 1:12-17
Matthew 5:17-22

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It is important to set the scene clearly. The text is from the Sermon on the Mount: a collection of the teachings of Jesus which occupies the fifth through the seventh chapters of the Gospel according to Matthew. In the classical posture of Rabbi and students, He was sitting and His disciples were standing around Him. On the periphery of the little circle, however, stood some other men listening quite intently. Among these were several Scribes, the men responsible for copying the Holy Law of Judaism, teaching it, and interpreting its 613 separate statutes. Among the group also were several Pharisees, men ordinarily of substantial wealth, position, dignity who made an avocation of obeying the law as the Scribes taught and interpreted it. We're not always fair with the Pharisees: in fact, they are the victims of an historical stereotype which is simply not accurate. In our vocabulary "Pharisee" is synonymous with pompous, arrogant, self-righteousness. The truth is that they were admirable people. When American, middle-class Protestants talk about Pharisees, Walt Kelly's famous Pogo line, "I have seen the enemy and they is us" comes to mind. The Pharisees were good men: they were generous in their charity: they were the backbone of Judaic culture: they bore responsibility for the common life of the nation: they were the pillars of society. Recent scholarship suggests that the strength and stability of Pharasaic religion with its devotion to the law was the only thing that allowed the nation to retain some of its identity through the experience of Roman occupation. It is too easy to cast them in the role of villain. In fact, they were the kind of people every society needs if it is to survive.

Their interest in Jesus of Nazareth was not at all academic curiosity. They had heard, frankly, that He was a trouble maker; that without any credentials to speak of He was advocating moral irresponsibility; He was disregarding the law - the revealed will of God. And an increasing number of people were interested in what He was saying. So they had come to hear for themselves - as the guardians of all that was good and noble and worthy about their culture.

They were pleased when He indicated that it was not His purpose to abolish the law; that, in fact, He was interested in seeing it fulfilled. When He went on to say that anyone who keeps the law and teaches it will be great in the Kingdom of Heaven, the Scribes and Pharisees felt personally complimented.

And then, without warning, without even a transitional sentence to soften the blow, He said something devastating. Perhaps gesturing in their direction, He said, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." J.B.Phillips renders it, "...your goodness must be a far better thing than the goodness of the Scribes and Pharisees before you can set foot in the Kingdom of Heaven at all."

Obviously that was most offensive to them. But if they could calm their anger a bit they would have recognized that it was also logically inconsistent. How, possibly, could He believe that the law was good, and keeping it very important, and then use them - the very people who were doing what He recommended - as examples of what a person must exceed if he had any interest in doing the will of God?

Well, He did say it, and they became angry, as we become angry when someone begins chipping away at moral standards on the basis of which we live our lives. What He was doing, of course, in this segment of ethical teaching was moving the definition of morality or goodness away from the law and grounding it somewhere else. He took

obvious care not to infer that the law was wrong or useless. Quite to the contrary He held up the Holy Law of Judaism as admirable and necessary. But, it is no longer the way to define what is good, He said. Goodness is "more than" obedience to the law.

That issue: the capacity of a legal code to define goodness and morality did not originate with Jesus. The Old Testament is full of it. Time and time again the people of Israel are so busy obeying the law that they neglect to obey God. The prophetic tradition in Judaism is the place where the discrepancy is revealed. Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, Isaiah thundered against a religion of law which neglected the will of God. In the Old Testament Lesson this morning, for instance, we read, "cease to do evil". That's law. But then, "learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow." That is the will of God which no law can prescribe in detail. It is the "more than" that Jesus taught His disciples as a new ethical imperative.

As we think about Ethics for Modern Christians, that is still the issue. In our culture, as is the case with all others, minimum morality is defined negatively. In order for common life to be possible rules are necessary: to prohibit killing and stealing, for instance. The trouble is that what goes for Christian morality is often little more than a similar list of negative prohibition. Christian ethics comes out sounding like good citizenship: don't kill, steal, cheat or lie. At certain times and places in our own history the list has been augmented to include the favorite evangelical sins of the flesh: don't smoke, don't drink, don't dance, don't have fun. Regardless of your personal position on these particular activities, the definition of morality which emerges is entirely negative. It is based on the activities a person avoids.

Now, only the very naive, the anarchists - for instance, maintain that life is possible without rules and laws and some system of sanctions which makes the law work. What the New Testament teaches is very simply that obeying the law is not what constitutes a Christian Ethic. It is more than that.

The whole isse was vaulted into national notoriety in the past decade or so, first by the fact that an increasing number of Americans were disregarding the traditional standards of ethical behavior. Cheating the government became an acceptable national pastime. And there are still many who defend the government's right to lie to and cheat the people. Shoplifting reached epidemic proportions, not among poor people but middle and upper middle class housewives. The legalization of marijuana became a national debate; young people were - and are - sent to jail, while its use is winked at and practically promoted by cultural heroes. Simultaneously, a whole library of literature was being published under titles which themselves sounded frightening, the most popular of which was <u>The New Morality, Situation Ethics</u>, by Joseph Fletcher, an Anglican. Every week a very popular television show was advising America that "if it feels good, do it", and a lot of people concluded that the New Morality was somehow part of a conspiracy to turn us into a generation of irresponsible hedonists.

The basic argument of the New Morality proponents, however, was that Christian Ethics must be moved from negative rules to positive decision making and action. But nobody seemed to hear that part. What sold books and caught public attention was the suggestion that the rules may be broken on occasion; that no rule or law is ultimate; that a Christian has to decide what to do in each new situation.

That sounded frightening to a lot of people, particularly those with a sharpened sense of human sin. It sounded, frankly, like an open invitation to do what one wants to do and then create the rationale, in retrospect, out of the situation. Calvinists concluded, rightly I believe, that if that's all there is to making ethical decisions things aren't going to turn out very well most of the time. In the absence of firm guidelines we are remarkably creative in constructing the rationale for what we did in the past.

The importance of the New Morality, and its faithfulness to the New Testament, however, is in what it said positively about making ethical decisions. In his book, Fletcher summarized the position: "Only one thing is intrinsically good, namely, love: nothing else." What that means is that there are situations in which a sensitive person may be torn between traditional standards of right behavior and the more complex demand to do what is most loving for all concerned. Any pastor has known the agony of that conflict. Traditional standards of right behavior dictate that pre-marital pregnancy should be resolved by making it marital - as quickly as possible. But that is not always the good - or the loving decision for all involved. The most dramatic example of the conflict I ever read was the story of a German woman who was a prisoner of war in a Russian camp, separated from husband and family, and about to be shipped out to Siberia. The only prisoners who were being returned were the sick, aged and pregnant women. After great personal struggle she persuaded a camp guard to cooperate, became pregnant and was sent home to a joyful reunion with her family. Later, she and her husband took the child to their pastor for baptism - and were refused - on the grounds of her immorality.

The terrible decision of President Truman to use the atomic bomb is another and immediate example of situation ethics and the relative nature of the word goodness itself.

The dramatic illustration of Situation Ethics is not altogether helpful for you and me. We are not likely to be in those situations. What is important, I think, is to learn the rightness of their basic argument: that the law - the rules by which we live our lives - is not the sole arbiter of morality: that an Ethic for Modern Christians is going to take us where we would prefer not to be - like the Pharisees in Jesus' day - outside the safe perimeters of the law.

The New Morality - and the ethical teaching of Jesus - assumes that it is a good thing to be free; that people can be and essentially want to be free to come to their own conclusions. But history teaches that the assumption is not always as safe as it sounds. There is a very famous, and oft quoted passage in Dostoyevsky's great novel, The Brothers Karamazov, in which Jesus has returned to earth and is arrested. In the dark of night the Grand Inquisitor visits Him in His cell to tell Him that what people really want is security, not freedom. "If you really love people," he argues, "you want to make them happy, not free. People want law, not responsibility. Christ, he says, must not start again all that old business about freedom and grace and commitment and responsibility. Let things be: let the church with its laws handle them. Will Jesus please go away." (William Barclay, Ethics in a Permissive Society).

We thought last week about the moral complexity of our society: how good and evil no longer submit to the old characterizations. We are having to make decisions about questions our parents never had to confront: the whole matter of homosexuality, abortion, genetic manipulation, capital punishment, and this week, as if on cue, the whole matter of the conflict between freedom of the press and community standards of decency. Given the complexity of those issues anyone with an ounce of ethical

sensitivity is feeling some very real anxiety. It would be nice to rely on someone or something simply to tell us what is right and wrong. Legalism, at times, looks very good.

But if it has done nothing else, the New Morality has served to keep us alert to the dangers of legalism. Mark Twain once referred to a man as "good in the very worst sense of the word". And Donald Mathers has suggested that the "fanatical love of virtue has done more damage to men and society than all the vices put together because it tends to discredit itself."

As an example, William Barclay cites Ogden Nash's play The Rainmaker. "The Rainmaker makes love to a spinster girl...He does not really love her, but he is determined to rekindle her hopes of marriage and children. Her morally outraged brother threatens to shoot him. Her father is a wise old rancher and says to his son, 'Noah, you're so full of what's right that you can't see what's good'."

Sometimes the right and the good are in conflict and the Christian is called in those situations to proceed with great care and great love, and to decide for himself or herself.

The real danger of legalism in religion, however, is that it allows us very comfortably to ignore the essence of our Lord's ethical teaching - the goodness that is "more than" the law prescribes. It allows us - and this was the Pharisees' position - to feel righteous because we have avoided doing things that are bad. And that's just not an adequate, nor honest, ethic for people who are trying to follow Jesus Christ.

I wasn't very old when I learned that lesson. Childhood friends of mine were from a family which was totally and completely and publicly evangelically Christian. Half the activities which were normal in our home were forbidden in theirs. Because of their zeal in pursuing the Christian life I concluded that they had to be right. But when a black family attempted to purchase a house in the neighborhood, they were the ones to begin the petition to see that it didn't happen. And I concluded that they had missed something rather important in the New Testament.

The New Morality - Situation Ethics - isn't new at all. No matter how hard we squeeze it the New Testament will not take on the shape of a rule book for every situation. What it does is offer a model: an example of how people ought to live.

"Your righteousness," He told His disciples, "must exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees." It must be more than refraining from evil: it is a positive ethic of love and His life serves as the model for what that might look like if we ever began to take it seriously.

"Love your neighbor as yourself: - that's the whole law in one sentence," He told them once. "A man was going down to Jericho and he fell among robbers," He told them on another occasion and in that story the men who stayed within the perimeters of legal morality walked on by. The good man - the Samaritan - stopped, took off his coat, bound up the bloody wounds and carried the victim to safety, none of which was mentioned in the legal code. "Feed my sheep", He told them, "heal the sick, help the blind to see, free the captives."

The word for the New Morality is love: not romantic love, not filial love: but hard-nosed good will toward all men: love which in Thomas Merton's words is based on the truth and doesn't shrink from deciding what is good and right: love that rolls up its sleeves to help the person who needs help.

Jesus himself is the model. His life is that love lived out in the world.

An Ethic for Modern Christians begins with the law: the rules and prohibitions which history has taught us are necessary for our survival. It proceeds to the particular ethical guidelines contained in religious tradition: it never discards tradition simply because it is old. In fact, it listens to the past with great respect and care. But it does not stop here - at the Civil Law, or at religious tradition. Neither define morality as Jesus did. Rather, the Christian Ethic considers the situation and asks, "What does love demand of me?"

One of the abiding ironies is that the New Morality has been criticized for being lax and easy and encouraging ethical laziness. The fact is that the law, religious rules and regulations, are infinitely easier: and that the Ethic of Jesus - the freedom of deciding responsibly - is the most demanding and difficult ethic you and I have ever tried.

I invite you to it. It's a very old new morality. It began when one day He told His disciples, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees..."

Amen.

Father, we live in demanding and difficult times. Help us to sort out the good as we make our decisions. Then grant us the courage to do it. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.